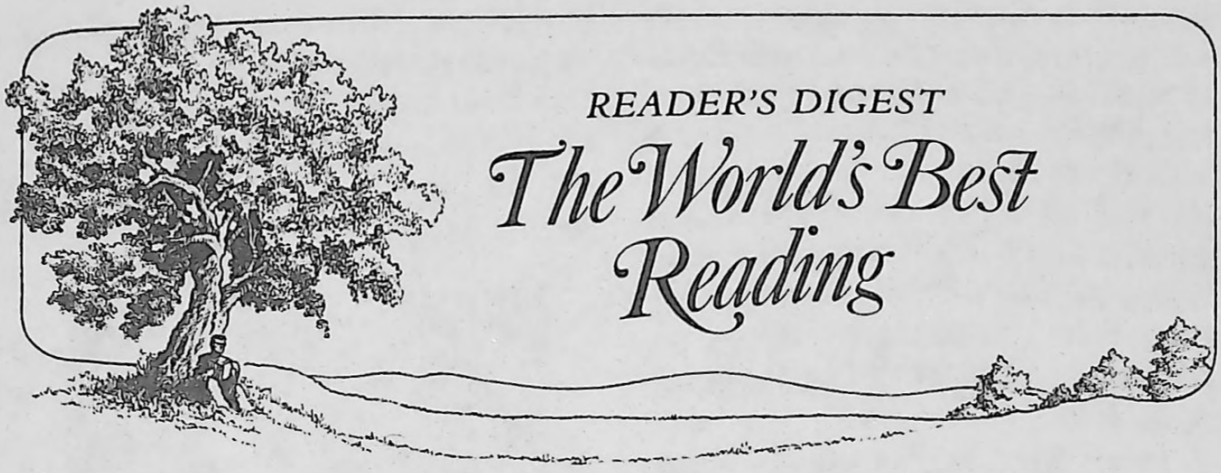

Tales of the South Pacific

JAMES MICHENER

In the last days of World War II, as a growing storm churned the blackening sky, a transport plane tried a desperate landing on an island airstrip in the southwestern Pacific—failed, tried again, failed.

It's got to be this time, or we don't make it, thought one of the passengers, a lieutenant commander in the United States Navy. He held his breath as the frail plane once again approached the runway, nearly invisible under a shroud of clouds. This time the pilot managed to drop down and landed flawlessly.

That hair-raising experience made the naval officer examine his life in a way he never had before. He walked the airstrip for hours that night wondering, What do I stand for? What do I want to do with the years that will be allowed me? As the stars came out, he suddenly knew: I'm going to live the rest of my life as if I were a great man.

James A. Michener was thirty-eight years old and had been good at a lot of different jobs—schoolteacher, book editor, and war correspondent. But "great"? That was something else, particularly since he hoped to make his name writing fiction and his only published book was a manual for teaching high school social studies. But with his resolution the direction of James Michener's life would be forever altered. He decided, "I would not act as if I were a great man, for that was too pompous; but I would act as if I knew what greatness was."

In the fifty years that have passed

The South Pacific: an enchantingly beautiful world of coral atolls, graceful coconut palms, and endless ocean. In the 1940s, when the world was at war, it was a place where men went to do battle and, sometimes, to die. And sometimes, in the midst of war, they found friendship—and even love. Here, fifty years after that war ended, are the unforgettable tales of Nellie Forbush, Joe Cable, and Bloody Mary as only James Michener can tell them.

since that fateful night, Michener has become a publishing phenomenon known to millions of readers. A complete collection of his work adds up to more than twenty novels, most of them best sellers, as well as another score of distinguished nonfiction books on topics ranging from a study of Japanese prints to the probing *Kent State: What Happened and Why*.

James Michener has come a long way from that distant island in the South Pacific, but he had already traveled an even greater distance just to get there. One of his favorite authors, Charles Dickens, could have written the dramatic story of this nameless foundling's upbringing. He was a tiny infant when Mabel Michener, a poor Quaker widow in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, took him in. She raised him as her own son along with a ragtag collection of foster children who came and went.

Several times poverty forced her to send the boy to the local poorhouse, where he saw the roughest edge of life in the wasted faces of winos and hoboes. "An experience like this is overwhelming," he remembered. "To see these fellows and hear their stories and to see life come to such a drab ending—my God, a poorhouse in those days was something. You would have to be inert not to respond to it."

Seeing such things would have terrified most children, but in young Michener they awakened a hunger to learn more about people and the world in which they lived. By the time he was fourteen, he was hitchhiking for months across America, visiting all but three of the forty-eight states and living off the kindness of strangers.

When Michener returned to Doylestown, he worked as a shill at an amusement park, and one summer he traveled with a Chautauqua tent show, trying out his skills as an actor. But his true passion was sports. Michener wrote a sports column for a Doylestown paper and won a scholarship to Swarthmore College for his skill at baseball, basketball, and tennis.

James Michener

In 1929 he graduated summa cum laude with a degree in English and history, just as America became locked in the firm grip of the Depression. But this didn't deter the young graduate. He went on to teach at four different schools and colleges—including a stint at Harvard—and tried his hand as a textbook editor. Still, travel continued to lure him. He collected folk stories in Scotland's wild Hebrides, studied art in London and Italy, and traveled through Spain with a troupe of bullfighters.

His restless mind was watching, noting, and recording the fascinating people and places he saw, but for

years he didn't write anything down. "There must have been a factor of fear," he once said. "I didn't want to face the big challenges, was perfectly happy the way it was."

The Japanese bombs that fell on Pearl Harbor in 1941 blew Michener out of his lethargy. As a Quaker, he could have claimed exemption from the military, but he was intensely patriotic and volunteered to enter the service, enlisting as a common seaman. When the navy discovered that he could write, it trained him as an officer and flew him to the South Pacific.

Michener would coin a new word to describe his love for the watery world he found there: nesomaniac—one who is mad about islands. The vast sweeps of the Pacific, glorious with blasts of color and studded with thousands of shimmering atolls, stirred his soul. For three years he served on nearly fifty islands spread across thousands of miles of ocean stretching from Australia to Tarawa. From cloud-ringed Bora-Bora, "the most beautiful island in the world," to the perilous island airstrip that so nearly took his life, Michener was enraptured by the Pacific.

And throughout his life this fascination with islands would continue. In the years ahead, Michener would visit and write about the islands of Hawaii, Melanesia, the Caribbean—even the Aleutian Islands, near the Arctic Circle. "I would be," he later mused, "probably the only one who ever spent an Easter on Christmas Island and a Christmas on Easter Island." On islands, he always felt, "one lives more intensely."

Michener was enchanted by the physical beauty of the South Pacific, but it was the people he met there that truly captured his imagination. *Tales of the South Pacific* is fiction, but the French planter Emile De Becque, the feisty navy nurse Nellie Forbush, and the bilious, bawdy Luther Billis, as well as dozens of others, are drawn straight from the rich collection of island humanity that Michener observed. He brought these characters to life on his old navy-issue typewriter in the flicker-

The Illustrations

This edition of Tales of the South Pacific *features illustrations created especially for it by artist James Barkley, who saw the commission as an opportunity to pay homage to the veterans of World War II. Barkley is a talented and versatile painter whose work has graced the pages of outstanding books for both children and adults. Among his many honors is a Caldecott Medal nomination for* Why the Wind God Wept. *He and his wife, Diane, make their home in New York State.*

ing lamplight of a jungle shack during the closing months of the war.

Upon his return to America, *Tales of the South Pacific* was published, winning the author the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. Then, in 1949, the composer Richard Rodgers and the lyricist Oscar Hammerstein II adapted the book into the smash Broadway hit *South Pacific*, starring Mary Martin and Ezio Pinza. The royalties from this musical comedy would give Michener the freedom to pursue writing full-time. Years later, when asked about the key to success, he grinned. "Make sure Rodgers and Hammerstein read your first book."

In the years after *Tales of the South Pacific*, Michener became one of America's most widely read authors. The 1950s saw a string of books about Asia—*The Bridges at Toko-Ri, Sayonara, Rascals in Paradise*, to name a few. And it was during this time that the author found happiness in his personal life as well. After two previous marriages that ended in divorce, in 1955 he married Mari Yoriko Sabusawa, a Japanese American editor for the American Library Association.

The decade culminated in 1959 with *Hawaii,* a novel that set the tone for Michener's later fiction. From then on, every two or three years the author would publish a monolithic, time-spanning chronicle. With books like *The Source, Centennial, The Covenant,* and *Poland*, he dramatized the history and culture, politics and people of nearly every corner of the world.

Michener once described himself as "just a guy up on a hill writing." With the publication of these acclaimed novels, however, he would never be thought of this way again. Now, with readers all over the world clamoring to read his every word, Michener became an institution. One of his admirers was William Clements, the governor of Texas, who felt that he had finally found an author who could handle the magnitude of the Lone Star State. In 1981 he invited Michener to come and write *Texas*, and even offered him an office and staff at the University of Texas to help him.

The creator of so many best sellers is a complex man not easily categorized. Those who know him have described him as easterner and westerner, activist and intellectual. He is the frugal child of poverty who still saves rubber bands, yet a philanthropist who gives away millions of dollars to his favorite charities. When Michener finished the marathon writing of his first blockbuster, *Hawaii*, he didn't take a vacation. Instead he ran for Congress. He lost, but this did not discourage him from being involved in public service. For nine years he served on the committee that recommends to the U.S. Postal Service which stamps the government should print. And he has also been an adviser to NASA, an experience that intensified his interest in astronomy and led to another best seller, *Space.*

Today James Michener and his wife, Mari, make their home in Austin, Texas. He still continues to write.

Ever since that night in the South Pacific when he paced a lonely airstrip, James Michener has acted as if he knew what greatness was. And in the process he has indeed become great.

Page 2: Courtesy of James A. Michener

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